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ABSTRACT

At Stephen F. Austin State University (Texas), focus group research was conducted to determine research needs and to inform the development of a new educational research center. Four graduate research assistants and a professor in the Department of Educational Leadership formed a study group to review the literature on focus groups and methodology. Using the "Focus Group Kit" books (R. Krueger, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), the group developed questions, prepared materials, and completed five pilot sessions and reports on them. Biographical commentaries from the participants show how the individuals became a team. These personal narratives chronicle the development of a cohesive group of moderators for future research focus groups. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH CENTER: PLANNING FOCUS GROUP STUDIES TO BUILD CONNECTIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

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DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH CENTER: PLANNING FOCUS GROUP STUDIES TO BUILD CONNECTIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

ABSTRACT

Focus group research methodology skills develop though a study group format. Four doctoral research assistants and one assistant professor study the processes and procedures for focus groups in order to conduct multiple, concurrent projects that will address the research needs of a geographic region. The materials and process are described, and individual vignettes relate developmental experiences.

DEVELOPMENT OF A RESEARCH CENTER: PLANNING FOCUS GROUP STUDIES TO BUILD CONNECTIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

INTRODUCTION

Focus group research consists of group interviews to gather data on pre-determined focus questions. The researcher relies on the interaction of the group, supplies the topic for discussion, and acts as moderator. The focus group method gleans the most insightful data from the interaction within the group. The focus group approach has been employed to assist in the development and implementation of programs (Bradley & Frederick 1994; Mueller & Drueger, 1985; Nolfi & Forney, 1993; Packard & Dereshiwsky, 1989; National Association of Workforce Development Professionals, 1995; National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1992; Ohio State Department of Education, 1997) as well as program evaluations. An organization may choose the conduct such an evaluation may at any point in a program's development or at the closure of a program (Krueger, 1994; (Morgan, 1997).

At Stephen F. Austin State University, the Department of Secondary and Educational Leadership focus group research was designed to determine research needs and in order to inform the development and structure of a new Educational Research Center. Because trained moderators are a necessity for focus group research (Packard & Dereshiwsky, 1989; Krueger, 1998c), four graduate research assistants and one professor in the Department of Educational Leadership formed a study group to review the literature and methodology. Using the *Focus Group Kit*, Books 1 through 6 (Sage, 1998), the study group prepared reports and discussed the method. Development of the rationale for the questions, development of questions, preparation of materials, completion of five pilot sessions, transcription of data, analysis of the data, participation in debriefing sessions, and the construction of a data report from the pilot occurred as the group progressed

through the steps presented in the books. Over a two month period, the group worked together in these sequential guidebooks and planned how to implement the five pilots studies that would give each person an opportunity to practice as moderator and assistant moderator..

Krueger & King (1998d) suggest that groups experience a linear pattern of skill and team development based on the theoretical framework of Tuckman (1965). Tuckman recognized patterns of behavior that related to task and social-emotional relationships. According to Tuckman, stage, task, and social relationship patterns are: *forming* to identify the task and to discover acceptable behavior, which may be accompanied with anxiety and frustration; *storming* to respond to the task and to deal with each other; *norming* to discuss opinions and to develop cohesion (There is a feeling that the group can work out problems in an acceptable manner.); and *performing* to complete the task. In *performing,* the roles are understood and the leadership is clear. Individuals work in concert to assist each other in order to achieve goals. Other researchers disagreed with the rigid linear model of Tuckman and others (Bales & Strodbeck, 1951; Applebaum, 1984). Poole & Roth (1989) insisted that the nature of the steps within a task and unique the abilities and relationships of group members would cause the linear models to vary. People just do not develop skills at the same rate. All researchers, however, seem to agree that persons within groups experience definite stages of development while learning to work together.

Such recognizable stages provide the framework for describing experiences during the study group session to develop focus group research skills. The tasks completed by this focus group team represent the content of the interaction through which relationship issues were resolved and a shared vision of the focus group communication process emerged. The team learned how to make decisions and reach consensus on topics that demanded consistent behaviors in order to implement several focus group projects in different locations that are given by different moderators..

TEAM DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

The following biographical commentaries tell how five individuals became a team. These experiences repeat the patterns recognized in previous studies but show variance between individuals and recursive patterns within the experiences of individuals who are becoming part of the task group. The personal accounts of the study group process chronicle the development of a cohesive group of moderators who will concurrently conduct research focus groups. The personal accounts represent data from five reflexive journals and transcriptions of tape recordings from the group reflection sessions.

This Group Can Do Anything
Sharon Spall, Assistant Professor

When I received the assignment to develop a focus group qualitative research project in order to guide the direction and structure of the new Educational Research Center, feelings of excitement and anxiety dominated my professional life. Here was a grand opportunity to learn about another methodology, but where and how to begin. The concepts familiar to me were related to qualitative research. I had never conducted a focus group, however, I could draw from only two previous experiences. At one time I worked with problem solving groups in a community based programs. On another occasion, I had given peer debriefing support to a dissertation student who used focus group methodology to determine perceptions of a new decision-making model.

I was tense. In addition, four, wide-eyed graduate assistants who had no background in research or focus groups were assigned to me for the project. This may have been the blind leading the visually impaired, and I'm not sure which one I was. We began collecting books and articles that defined the focus group research. The first meeting day, the students piled the results of their search in the center of the table and began relating the information. As they talked, I panicked. Each had read a different perspective of the process.

I felt intense personal and professional responsibility for the successful development of the project and for the skill development of the graduate assistants. Because my sense of duty and responsibility were weighing heavily on my mind, I must have appeared very serious and rigid in those first meetings. My paramount problem was: how do I get all five of us moving in the same direction through this information, and how do I insure that we all share and apply the same knowledge base so our data across several focus groups with different moderators will be internally consistent, coherent, and useful. As the students and I stumbled through the library materials, my panic and dread only grew. Structure. This is what I need. I need structure (Isn't it interesting that you don't always know what you need?).

By accident, I found the Focus Group Kit in a Sage Publisher's catalog. Here were six books that systematically lead the novice through focus group research design. These would give direction and perhaps structure to the study group. We each took a book, outlined the contents, and taught the procedures to the others. I thought, "I can do this."

When the presentations began, my eyes really opened for the first time during this project. These four very capable graduate assistants can carry their part of the responsibility for the success of our project (notice I said "our project"). I don't have to hold on to the responsibility. When I let go, the students actively stepped in to assume leadership roles. We became a learning team and developed our skills through study, practice, collective reflection, sharing ideas, and sharing tasks. I didn't need rigid structure, I needed flexibility with purpose and directions. Together we determined the purpose and direction. I developed confidence that our team could work out any problem.

At the outset of our focus group study, Dr. Sharon Spall performed as the reluctant leader of our group of five researchers by charging each member of the group with reading, summarizing and reporting on at least one book of David L. Morgan's 6-volume series about the focus group method. She was *performing* as the leader early on, while I - a graduate research assistant embarking on my first study - latched onto the structure she brought to the excitement, ambiguity and uncertainty I felt about our *forming* group roles and our emerging group processes. I was new to my relationship with professors as a doctoral student in a new doctoral program in educational leadership, as a graduate research assistant in a nascent research center, and as a co-researcher utilizing unfamiliar research methodology. I embarked on this study based on a collaborative design feeling tentative about how functional we would truly become as a research group. Our broad review of literature and our subsequent immersion in Morgan's methodology served to ground my *forming* by building in early success with structured task completion.

Within a week, Dr. Spall relinquished her leadership role. All four research assistants stepped into their co-leadership roles, sharing their respective insights into Morgan's focus group methods. As I presented the Morgan book I had chosen to summarize, I worried about my proficiency, the adequacy of my summary, and the clarity of my presentation. I felt responsible to the group, and responsible for the success of the group. In this *performing* stage I was still *forming*. I needed reassurance. I also needed sincere feedback to establish a foundation of trust in the group. This was all exemplified in my journal reflections of October 16, 1997.

In The Focus Group Guidebook Morgan suggested that focus groups can effectively fill the gap between how we think we can best meet the needs of our customers and how they think we can best meet their needs. One member of our group asked for clarification.

> *I used the present study context to explain that a gap exists between the University Research Center as a service provider and the field practitioners in public schools.*

For us to define the mission of the Research Center from the scholar perspective would likely corrupt the service we could provide relative to practitioner needs. Thus, the focus group bridges this gap in perspective. (October 16)

My trust in group honesty was strengthened. Another group member was so impressed with my clarifying example that she encouraged me to include it in my reflections. Thus, I felt reassured that my place in the group was valued.

I experienced *storming* and *norming* as the other books were presented in other styles with equal proficiency. I slogged through the morass of comparing and contrasting by trying to discern whether different peer styles meant my style was right or wrong. In the end, the differences were recognized for the strength they lent to the trust we were building.

This method of expanding our knowledge base about this research method seems to me to be exciting. I am intrigued with the concept of each of us summarizing a portion as a means of yielding a composite for all. I sense that this establishes an implicit willingness/precedent to trust each others' processes and scholarship. It is by its nature a team-building effect. (October 16)

The precedent that had been established defined a group ethic that we were all going to pull all of us along; that we were all going to become proficient in every aspect of the focus group method, rather than collaborating as specialists. Indeed, we each subsequently made phone and written contacts, moderated a focus group, performed as an assistant moderator, transcribed focus group tapes, and analyzed resultant data. Between our first book discussions and data analysis two months had elapsed. Our process was taking much more time than we had anticipated, and I was valuing the time as time well spent. Our early attention to detail set the stage for fluid group processes through succeeding stages of the study.

During the first month we continued to refine our understandings of the method and our own goals. By the middle of November we had *normed* our focus group format in

preparation for the first pilot group. Each member of our group assumed one or more of the necessary roles and found security in a return to a focus on task completion amid our renewed excitement, ambiguity and uncertainty. While we were *norming*, we were all also back to the *forming* stage. We were anticipating the success of our collaborative design, and the pilot groups tested our felt success on many levels at once.

Dr. Spall moderated the first pilot group. While she was *performing*, I was *forming*, *storming*, and *norming*. That is, I was monitoring her style, assessing its appropriateness for my own pilot group, and engaging in reflective debriefing for the benefit of all concerned. In terms of the larger study, we were moving beyond our *norming* behavior into *performing*. At each step through the study, though, every participant in the study seemed to revisit the team building process. I even witnessed the focus group participants *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, and *performing*. As I debriefed with one of my peers after moderating my own focus group I, again, needed the reassurance and honest feedback I received when we were *forming* in the study's earliest stages. Even though I had just finished *performing*, I was only just beginning my *forming*. Herein lies the dynamic strength of including multiple researchers in focus group research.

The utility of peer researchers throughout this study has been in the support of team members through the recursive team building and rebuilding processes. While I was *storming* other team members were *forming*, *norming*, and *performing*. While I was *performing*, other team members were *forming*, *storming* and *norming*. Through every step of the process I felt balanced by my peers, and I balanced my peers. While our individual experiences of our group processes may have been parallel and linear on the large scale, they seemed to be complementary and uniquely recursive through each phase of the study. Rarely, if ever, did all five of us experience the group process in like manner simultaneously when engaged in study components. Our dynamic balance was achieved precisely because we were each complementing the others.

Experientially, it seems our focus group study benefited greatly from the collaborative participation of five researchers. The strength of our team seemed to be that we never felt stuck in the team building process because at least one of us always seemed to be in each phase of the *forming*, *storming*, *norming* and *performing*. We effectively kept the recursive cycle moving, never allowing the momentum of a single phase to dominate team dynamics. Formal study may be beneficial in determining the optimal number of researchers recommended for collaborative participation in focus group studies.

Theater of Focus Groups: Planning, Preparing, Performing

Sheron Darragh, Graduate Research Assistant

Lights, camera, action! The stage is set, the equipment has been checked and rechecked, and the actors have memorized their lines. All is ready for opening night. Preparing for a major theatrical production couldn't have produced the anxiety, curiosity, and excitement I felt as we began preparing for a focus group study.

During our orientation meeting Dr. Jenlink shared his vision for the research center and the different studies we were to begin. I remember feeling excited that I was to be included in the creation of a new research center for Stephen F. Austin.

My excitement soon turned into anxiety, and I immediately entered the forming stage of team development when we met the first time to discuss the focus group study to be conducted. My knowledge of this research method to this point was limited. I found myself entering into this endeavor wracked with self doubts, and uncertainty as to what my contribution to the team might be. My journal entries are filled with questions concerning how this will all take place. I was extremely worried about my lack of experience in the field of research, and the limited knowledge base that I had concerning conducting research.

I feel some what anxious about producing the quality of work expected. Will I be able to gain the necessary information that will be useful in guiding the development of a framework for the research center? (September 15)

As a research assistant working with a professor, I was unclear as to what my role in the group might be. *To be able to work with a team, I must first understand my role within this team. I do not at this time have a clear definition of this role.* (September 22)

At the suggestion of Dr. Spall, we read selected books from a series on conducting focus groups. I found this extremely helpful in eradicating some of the self- doubts caused by my lack of knowledge. I realized during the review of the literature that this just might work out after all. I began to feel more comfortable in the knowledge that I had something to contribute to the group. This boosted my confidence in myself, and eased any remaining doubts regarding my ability to undertake this study.

As we began to develop questions, I remember thinking back to Dr. Paul MacLean's study on the triune brain and the 'fight or flight' feeling that takes place in the brain stem when one is feeling threatened or experiencing anxiety. I believe I downshifted into my brain stem for a short time period. So there I was, right back to were it all begins—the forming stage!

It was at this point that I realized I wasn't sure what questions we needed to ask in order to obtain the answers we wanted. I felt a need to step back and listen without interjecting my thoughts or comments. I was comfortable with allowing the others to take the lead. I didn't feel that I was slacking in my contribution to the group, instead I found I needed to listen to the others go through this process. This helped me clarify the purpose, and gather ideas for questions. During this time, I had to miss a day due to a previous commitment. Because of the difficulty I was having with the whole process of forming the questions, I was not happy about missing.

Writing the questions is difficult enough without having to miss a day of this process. I still do not have a clear understanding of the goals, or if the questions

we have are taking us in the right direction. How will missing one day affect my relations with the group? The other members would be growing through this experience without me. Will this cause a rift between us? Will I be able to catch up? (October 27)

The next day, however, we sat down together and the others took turns debriefing me about the process they were going through, and the concerns they had relating to the written questions. This debriefing allowed me to re-enter the team, and to become once again a valued member. As a result of my absence, I was able to provide a fresh perspective. The others had lived in the process of writing the questions so long that an outside opinion was helpful.

The same faint whisperings of anxiety once more teased me when we started to analyze the data. I did not cycle back to the forming stage because like a member of a theatrical cast I had begun to understand, and feel comfortable with my role, and considered myself a part of the group. Here was all this information taken from the transcripts and we had to sort, categorize, and look for emerging themes. This was a new experience for me, and perhaps another area where tremendous growth occurred. *How were we to take all this information, compile it into categories, come up with the emerging patterns, and use this information to identify the needs based upon what the participants had to say?* (December 9) The process sounded so easy, but once we began, I realized this was no simple task. Working in teams of two we plowed through the data looking for emerging patterns.

With opening night jitters I looked forward to monitoring my first focus group. The room was prepared, I had my lines memorized, and I was wearing the proper costume. *I have spoken at conferences, conducted workshops and seminars, and facilitated group meetings with teachers, but I was nervous about moderating this first session. This is unknown territory for me.* (November 21) Inspite of the nervousness, the trepidation, and worries, this dress rehearsal went smoothly.

All the rehearsing and preparation paid off. I firmly believe the time we spent in reading the literature, working through the process of developing the questions, sharing with each other our concerns, revisiting our purpose paid off. We evolved from individuals possessed with suspicions and anxieties to a cohesive, supportive team working together w with a clear sense of direction.

Conversations, Reflections and Growth: Building a Focus Group Research Team
Peggy B. Gill, Graduate Research Assistant

In the development of our newly established research center, focus groups were selected as one strategy to identify the patterns of perception of educational research from three viewpoints: consumer, participant and provider. Data gathered was intended to outline the relationships between research, practice and capacity in the view of participating Texas educators. Our team would develop questions, conduct focus groups throughout the region, analyze data, and report findings.

This task loomed as an extraordinarily exciting process. As a part of the research team, I would share responsibility for codification and analysis of the gathered data. Using my knowledge and value system, I would be challenged to gather, analyze, and report data with an unbiased attitude. Concurrent with my thrill of excitement was an air of uncertainty. It was as if I was entering a dark tunnel with a group of people I did not know, going to a destination I had never heard of, to find something that was indescribable and with an unknown use.

As a means of tracking our progress and clarifying perceptions, the research team began keeping journals to record our team actions as well as our reflections. My journal was littered with both excitement and uncertainty. *Terminology, history, philosophy, comfort level...so many new ideas at once. I can only go one step at a time*! (September 15) *This may be beyond me.* (September 17)

As we began the forming process, I felt somewhat isolated and disconnected. Was I talking too much? Too little? Did everyone understand this but me? Isn't anyone

listening to me? Could I afford to disagree? It seemed I had entered a time warp. I could see and hear what was going on, but I felt separated from the people and the process. *I don't know if I will ever really feel a part of this group. Everyone else seems to work so easily together.* (September 17)

Our team began to set parameters and subdivide our tasks into sequential stages. Having each member of the group read and report about different aspects of focus groups was a powerful activity. Each assumed an instructional leadership role while also maintaining a participant role during discussions. I not only gained significant information, but also better understood my part in the process. *I was impressed with the way each of us was focusing on our aspect of focus groups, wanting to add to the discussion, and 'flesh out' the general guidelines. The group excitement about the project is obvious.* (October 16)

We recognized and talked about the developing rhythms of the group. For us, late afternoons did not work well for processing information. Mutual sensitivity to individual and group limits evolved. A pattern of interaction developed; members listened carefully, offering affirming statements before adding comments. Everyone supported and reinforced a climate of mutual respect. As my competence and confidence increased, I viewed myself as an important part of the group as well as the process.

With a common knowledge base, we moved to the more ill defined task of clarifying our purpose. Again confusion and uncertainty appeared. Everyone seemed to see our purpose differently. *Every new piece of information just creates a new circle of questions and considerations.* (October, 27) In an effort to focus on the purpose statement, each of us drafted a sample statement and brought it to the group. As we worked through our five statements, the value of our journals became evident. *I also see the need to keep careful thorough notes of all discussion. It was extremely useful to have the notes from our other meetings to refer to when trying to identify our purpose.* (October 27) During the entire process our journals served a centering function, keeping us from

straying too far from our task while providing invaluable information about the thought processes behind our decisions.

With a clearly defined purpose statement, we turned toward the development of questions. With each new task, the group seemed to disintegrate into disparate individuals. We looked for ways to help us reintegrate and reached back to our focus group kit to find 'how to' information. We found sample questions and used them as a foundation upon which to build and move forward. With this structure the discomfort disappeared and we began creating and recreating questions. *The group works well building on each other's ideas. Ideas need to fly out there, be examined and let rest for a moment before going on. What seems like a good idea at first may ultimately be discarded.* (October 28) By keeping focused on our purpose statement, we aligned our questions and a funnel effect appeared. *As we progressed, the questions seemed to naturally refine themselves and position themselves within the sequence. This was a good session.* (October 28)

The group completed the questions, developed necessary forms and letters, and outlined the format for our first pilot group. Roles in the group seemed fluid as each of us moved in and out of the leadership position. We developed a common language with common meaning. *We discussed the meaning of 'capacity' and the need to have a common frame of reference for all terms.* (November 3) We examined the implications of our choices and the potential for unintended bias. We had changed perspective from "we are doing focus groups" to "we are the focus group." With that shift, discussions took on a unity of purpose beyond our carefully crafted formal purpose statement.

In November, I reviewed my initial journal entries and realized I was developing a deeper understanding of how my values and knowledge are reflected in the research. Every word, every action implicates the final outcome. I had focused on what the research would reveal about attitudes and beliefs in East Texas. *Why hadn't I realized I was a part of the attitudes and beliefs in East Texas? Would the true revelations be what I found in myself?* (November 13)

A series of pilot focus groups brought the process together. All the careful planning and serious study led to this. It was exhilarating. Watching others perform was like seeing a family member do something really well and reveling in his/her success. Leading my pilot focus group was just as exciting. The debriefing sessions were like having a personal trainer or coach who shares your goal of perfection. In these sessions we shared openly and unselfconsciously. *I have no fear of making a mistake. I know that my 'coach' will help me find a better way to do it next time.* (November 21) The security of a shared purpose and trusting relationships allowed me to fully explore my areas of concern and look for better ways to conduct focus groups.

Beginning the process of working with the data brought new challenges. Uncertainties and differences within the group resurfaced. Interpretation of transcribed text was multifaceted and agreement was difficult. Initially we extracted main ideas, but it became clear that we needed the richness of entire transcribed statements to identify patterns or themes. Analysis was most difficult when we worked in a large group. After dividing into pairs, I found a rhythm within which I could most effectively process the data. *I enjoyed talking about the data. Working with someone else really expands the possible interpretations. Every statement has about fifteen zillion meanings and even more implications.* (December 9) The pairs also provided support for each other as interpretations were presented to the entire group for critique.

After analyzing the data, we explored whether we were getting answers that would inform our purpose. This was particularly significant for me. An early journal entry questioned whether we would create a reality that we would fight to maintain. *We are bringing forth ideas and examining them for clarity or ambiguity. Once we agree on them and they become our reality, will we still be so open and accepting of criticism? Or do we move to our corner and begin a defensive stance?* (September 15) Our team had progressed to the point that we were comfortable questioning our entire process. Using our journals to

track our thought processes, we were able to step away emotionally and to thoughtfully examine our work. Questions were reworked to more clearly address our purpose.

In my envisioned dark tunnel of group learning experience, each of us had a flashlight and guidebook. When we pooled our lights and knowledge, we were able to explore our surroundings safely. If my light dimmed, others could guide. By adding my reflections to my guidebook, I created a rich, unique, personal view of the tunnel. By adding the reflections of others to my guidebook, I created images of the tunnel I might never have noticed. As a part of the team I am enriched and supported while maintaining my personal responsibility and perspectives.

We're Off to See the Wizard
Barbara Essien-Barrett, Graduate Research Assistant

What an unusual title for a research conference presentation. When given an option, I tend to take the creative approach to completing most tasks. You could say that I am the creative member of the team. I say this in jest, of course. After working very closely with my colleagues over the past few months, I have developed a genuine respect and appreciation for their individual talents, abilities, and interests. Coming to know their capabilities and being able to draw from them has been one of the most valued benefits of being a part of this research team. Quite honestly, not one of us is lacking in creativity.

Actually, there are two other reasons for this rather fanciful rendering of my experience. First, there is an elementary school teacher living inside me who just won't go away. Secondly, in my culture, we often use storytelling as a way of making sense of experiences that are new to us. By connecting the new experience to a story that the audience fully understands, we bring the less familiar experience into a familiar context, thereby, making meaning for the audience. The intent of the storytelling is two-fold. The storyteller simultaneously attempts to share his or her experience and capture the interest of

the audience. I hope to fulfill both purposes as you read my contribution to this paper. Thus, "We're Off to See the Wizard."

At the onset of this research project I felt as if I had been swept up by a whirlwind and thrust into an entirely different world, the world of research. So little was familiar. My work in education prior to now had not led me very far down the research path, and I had traveled less than a stone's throw down the qualitative course. Moderating focus groups, peer debriefing, transcribing field notes, analyzing and sorting interview data were all new avenues leading to roads I had not traveled.

At this point, I embodied all four of the main characters in Baum's tale, The Wizard of Oz. Like Tin Man, Lion and Scarecrow, I was filled with questions. Did I have the brain, heart, and courage for qualitative research? Being a first year graduate research assistant at the doctoral level my initial response to my new environment was just like Dorothy's, "I want to go home," home being that safe haven where familiarity and confidence bring tremendous tranquillity.

From the very beginning of the project I could sense a storm brewing. I was filled with conflicting emotions. The challenge of conducting research was both exciting and unnerving. Dazzled by the possibilities and daunted by the prospects I was tossed head first into the storm.

The storm. I vividly recall my ability to process or think clearly being clouded by inner turmoil. I had been thoroughly oriented to the purpose of the study. Early on the goals had been clearly communicated. Still, a haze obscured the vision. At times, I felt as though I hadn't the foggiest idea about how it would all come together. I'm not sure any of us knew. Sometimes the fog rolled away in huge patches and out of the haze streaks of light would dart through my brain like a thunderbolt reminding me that success was imminent.

For me, the storm was incredibly intense. Some days I went from being charged with excitement to feeling overwhelmed by the flood of new ideas. It's laughable now, but

I can recall times when I literally held my head in hand for fear that I was noticeably reeling from the turbulence.

During this time I frequently felt the need to revisit the purpose and goals of the study. Each time we did, I felt an inner quiet. As I recorded in my journal, *The purpose of this study is to determine perceptions of research. We are concerned with identifying research needs and interests as determined by educational leaders. We need to hear from them. It was good to revisit the purpose of the study again.* (October 28)

Revisiting the goals was settling. Sometimes, this brought the only lull in the storm. The lull was typically short-lived. At each new juncture the storm clouds loomed ominously in the background. Soon it dawned on me that because this was all so new to us the forecast for stormy weather was inevitable.

The most difficult challenge during the storm was learning to weather it. There were days when I simply took cover and withheld my opinions for fear of being wrong and feeling all washed up. At other times I defiantly shook my fist at even the prospect of one more deluge. I guess it was all a part of learning how to live in the process. The storm was definitely a critical part of the process.

In the storming stage journaling was my life raft. It was my way of holding on to my sanity and my security. My journal was a place of private expression and personal reflection. Referring back to it kept me focused and in touch with the work in progress. The more we talked and the more I wrote, the better I felt about the process and my contribution to the group. For a time my journal was as close as I could get to feeling at home with myself, this work, and my new environment.

The prospect of better days ahead brought me comfort during the stormy weather. Surely, at some point we could expect the clouds to dissipate and the sun to shine again. When the sun came out we would be able to find our way home. At least that's what I told myself in my journal at the close of a particularly difficult session. *After all, we are intelligent and resourceful graduate students. We have Dr. Spall and Dr. Jenlink to guide*

us. We can do this. Today was frustrating. This has to get better. (October 16) In the meantime it was important work that we were doing and we would have to live in the tumult of learning.

Over time the intensity of the turbulence diminished and the duration of each downpour was shorter. What a relief! Maybe, just maybe, the storm was passing over.

Which way to Oz? Although we were filled with uncertainty about exactly how we would accomplish the goals of this study, there was one thing upon which we could all agree. We needed to expand our knowledge base. We needed to know more about using focus group interviews to conduct research. Surely, there was some voice of authority, a focus group guru who could point us in the right direction. We needed to see the wizard. After all, the success of our work depended on our getting at home with this process. The wizard would be able to help us.

At this juncture we became fully engaged in our search for the wizard. We searched for literature on focus group research and read extensively. After reading what the experts had to say, I felt well-informed but still quite inexperienced. We returned to the literature. Once again we were hoping to meet the wizard who would teach us all we needed to know about conducting focus groups. Together, we read an complete set of manuals on using focus groups to conduct research. The focus group kit covered everything from writing interview questions to sorting and analyzing data. There was an entire book devoted to the importance of planning at every stage in this kind of research. The authors had attended to every detail. They left nothing to chance. Recruiting participants, the size and composition of groups, the importance of anonymity, it was all discussed in the focus group kit.

We read the manuals independently and shared the information with the other member of the team. This set a precedent for shared responsibility. It felt good. By this time our knowledge base had increased considerably. My comfort level was up. At least

the tasks seemed doable. Home was now in the not too distant future. Still, we had a long road to travel.

Although I was feeling better about myself, we still had not met the wizard. Locating him was no easy task. He was rather elusive. However, I began to notice how the profiles of the other team members were changing. One by one, somehow they began to look different. If I looked from just the right angle, I could catch glimpses of what looked like the wizard in each of their faces. Initially, I attributed what I saw to another patch of fog clouding my vision, but I noticed it happening with greater frequency. For brief moments the image of the wizard would appear in one of their faces. If I stared he'd vanish. I chose not to disclose what I was seeing for fear that I was hallucinating. I trusted this secret with on one other than my journal. I couldn't afford to risk any credibility I had established with the group by making ludicrous statements.

Then wonder of wonders one afternoon during a debriefing session, the strangest thing occurred. I heard the wizard's voice. We all read it. It sounded confident and self assured. It was the voice of authority. It was unmistakably the wizard's. I wondered why everyone was looking in my direction. I nearly fell off my chair when I realized that the voice was coming from me.

Could it be possible? The wizard was in our midst. How did it get here? There was no denying his presence. I could see him in the faces of every team member. I could hear his voice when I spoke. What had caused this transformation? Had we been to Oz without knowing it? That's when I remembered what the Wizard of Oz had said to Dorothy, Scarecrow, Lion, and Tin Man. "You had what you needed all the time!

Over time this team had developed the knowledge to conduct focus groups. Our brains were filled with new information. As doctoral students in education we certainly had a heart for the project. We knew that the voice of school leaders needed to be heard in every aspect of education. Finally, as graduate research assistants we had developed the courage to forge ahead in the world of research.

There is no place like home. From this point on, every step in the process brought us closer to home. Both individually and collectively, we had come to a place of knowing. Somehow we had managed to bring everyone along. It was apparent that we were a cohesive team with a shared vision. Together, we wrote and refined questions for the interviews, recruited participants, and conducted pilot groups. We learned the value of peer debriefing and experienced the tedium of transcribing field notes. There were still occasions when the clouds looked threatening, but now the sun was out.

Believe it or not, I could see the rainbow. In my culture the rainbow represents the place of promise. Home was just over the rainbow, and everyone knows "there's no place like home!"

THEMES

Four themes seem to reappear in each account: the development of a shared responsibility through continuous conversational interaction and individual reflection, the development of an interdependent work ethic, the recursiveness of stages in the emergence of a cohesive team, and individual patterns of skill development. First, the development of a shared responsibility began with each member preparing a discussion of a training segment from the Focus Group Kit (1998) during the study group. Each presentation clarified a topic on focus group research; the content and conversation encouraged others; and all gained confidence in the ability of group members to complete tasks and work together. The constant conversation during task completion, the collective reflection concerning progress of work, debriefing after reaching milestones, and group problem solving resulted contributed to the feeling of a shared responsibility for the success of the project. Each person reflected individually in a journal during this training process, which helped team members focus, recognize progress, keep track of the next necessary step, and

focus on group tasks. Such written records in a reflexive journal constitute a continuous line of conversations within oneself and reinforced individual roles within the work group.

Second, the team members devised ways to collaboratively complete tasks and gave praise and grateful comments for assistance given by another member. These kinds of activities developed an interdependent work ethic. During collective reflection, the team helped each other understand multiple perspectives of training procedures and of the data. One member experienced positive team support when she was absent. Not only did the group fill the gap during her absence, but all sat together and reviewed the information she missed when she returned. Members learned they could rely on each other.

Third, during the training, the developmental stages in the group process revisited each member with each new task. In the beginning, no one knew what he or she could do to make the project successful, the group did not know each other, and no one knew the basic methodology of focus group research. Each person experienced a high degree of anxiety and discomfort. Similar feelings of anxiety and discomfort reoccurred with each new task. With these subsequent tasks, however, the team had developed ways to work together and ways to solve task problems, so each person had other members of the team to act as a sounding board and as a supporter during stressful situations.

Fourth, members within the team described different rates of skill development and feelings of group belonging. One person remained anxious and frustrated longer than the others. Others only felt the solidarity of the group and confident in the group effort after debriefing the first pilot session. The professor felt confident that the group could solve problems and achieve success early in the study group presentations. While the rates of development varied, each member felt he or she had reached proficiency at the end of the training process.

CONCLUSION

Although the training steps for focus group implementation are carefully and clearly outlined in the Focus Group Kit (1998, team development experiences described in this paper speak to ways to insure internal coherence and sustain consistency within a study group, in particular for multiple moderators. The continuous interaction that began with the study group presentation and continued through the data analysis appeared to be especially important in this training process. After every session, the group debriefed in a collaborative, reflective activity and then again individually in the journal. The process described in this paper may inform other organizations planning focus group research for program development with multiple moderators.

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